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#### ABSTRACT

Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) programs can improve writing instruction and student writing overall by training teaching assistants (TAs) from all disciplines to better teach and assess writing skills. According to a 1998 Brigham Young study, 1,505 TAs were used by professors from all disciplines to help with teaching duties ranging from full responsibility for a class to tutoring to grading papers and exams, but only 17% of those TAs whose primary responsibility was grading received any formal training at all. Training for TAs can take many forms -- they can be trained through handbooks, Websites, tutor training programs, inservice training, or workshop presentations. Probably the best way to help TAs with the "paper load" (their main concern) is to teach them the value of teaching the writing process. Better papers are easier to evaluate, and students will write better papers if they are taught the skills and strategies they need to produce that paper from the beginning of the writing process. Another important skill to teach TAs is to identify their grading criteria. How to write marginal and end comments on papers is also a skill TAs need to learn. WAC program coordinators would do well to survey the TAs they work with to determine their concerns and needs before preparing materials. One concern is training the TAs in isolation from the professors they work with. Trained TAs can help faculty standardize their grading criteria, sequence their assignments to provide for intervention at early stages in writing, and explain disciplinary writing expectations more clearly. Appended is information about the workshops for teaching assistants. (NKA)



## TA Training Across the Curriculum: Covert Catalyst for Change

by

## Elizabeth Hedengren

Paper presented at the National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference (5th, Bloomington, IN, May 31-June 2, 2001).

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Fifth National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference May 31-June 2, 2001 Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

> TA Training Across the Curriculum: Covert Catalyst for Change by Elizabeth Hedengren Brigham Young University Provo, UT

In an ideal world, all professors would assign writing, and knowledgeably and sensitively respond to it themselves. In the real world, professors, laden with large sections, stringent research responsibilities, and sometimes a lack of confidence in teaching writing, delegate most or all writing assistance and evaluation to TAs.

According to a 1998 study, at BYU (30,000 students) 1505 TAs are used by professors from all disciplines to help with teaching duties ranging from full responsibility for a class to tutoring to grading exams and papers. In courses where writing is a significant part of the course work, either on exams or papers, these TAs become in essence writing teachers—teaching students how to write, and then assessing how well the students do it.

However, TAs are generally selected for their ability in a particular field, as chemists, political scientists or even classicists, not for their ability as writing teachers. Even students who can write well, may not know how to help others do so. And most TAs have little to no training in how to assess writing, a very complex skill that even faculty have difficulty with.

For years Writing Across the Curriculum programs have focused on training and supporting faculty. However, since TAs are used so extensively in connection with writing, shouldn't we also focus on training TAs? In the BYU study, only 17% of the TAs whose



primary responsibility was grading received any formal training at all. (The study did not distinguish between grading writing or other kinds of assessment.)

Writing Across the Curriculum programs can improve writing instruction and student writing overall by training TAs from all disciplines to better teach and assess writing skills, although doing so will add to the burdens of the WAC director.

## **Training**

Training for TAs can take many forms. Ellen Strenski (1992) suggests making use of the general TA Handbooks required at many universities, handbooks that detail legal and pedagogical expectations for TAs. At our school, now, this function is served by a web site. As Strenski suggests, the WAC Cooordinator can volunteer text for the handbook or website, and use this venue as a means of teaching skills in teaching and assessing writing. The problem here is that, in our case, few TAs actually know of the existence of this website. Departments do not require their reference to it.

Another possibility is to train TAs through an already functioning Tutor-training program. Stoecker, Mullin, Schmidbauer, and Young report on Sociology TAs that were trained in the Writing Center, studying theoretical articles, observing tutorials, and finally working as a tutor in the Writing Center, before even beginning to work with a writing intensive sociology class. At BYU, we train Political Science TAs in our Writing Fellow training class, where they read about writing and tutoring pedagogical theory, write about those subjects using a variety of genres, and practice tutoring as they work as Writing Fellows (Curriculm-based peer tutors). This training helps TAs to understand the theory behind the practice, and to feel confident in non-directive



tutorials, yet misses other important duties of TAs, such as teaching small discussion groups, and evaluating papers.

Bill McCleary in the Composition Chronicle (1997) reports on an accounting program at the University of Illinois–Champaign, that hired a "communications specialist" and a cadre of 7 TAs to do all of the grading for the course work. In this program, the "specialist" held weekly training sessions for the TAs to teach them "how to grade the papers and how to assist students with their writing" (2). Weekly training sessions led by a knowledgeable writing specialist would have the advantage of being able to specifically address the concerns of the moment–the particular assignment being graded, the particular concerns of the students the TAs are helping. However, TA coordinators in some departments report to me that weekly training sessions sometimes become clearing grounds for the business concerns of the week (turning in time cards, use of carrels, etc.) rather than training opportunities.

Most Writing Across the Curriculum programs already hold workshops for faculty, with extensive materials prepared to support the teaching. At BYU we decided to adapt those materials for training TAs. During Spring and Summer terms, my colleague and I teach a weeklong all-day every-day workshop for faculty. In this workshop we cover subjects from Writing to Learn to Commenting on Papers to Evaluation. (See Transparency.)

Last Fall we adapted these materials, and added more specifically targeting TAs, to prepare a 3-day workshop for TAs and adjuncts. During Winter Semester we offered a Saturday workshop for TAs. These workshops had the advantage of being intensive and extensive. We had the TAs for long enough that we could develop a rapport, and convince them of the importance of teaching writing well. The TAs themselves developed a unity, and came to



understand more what there responsibility was for teaching writing, and what they had in common with other TAs both within and without their discipline. We were able to explain in detail how writing process theory could influence the way TAs help students. We were able to give them hands-on experiences with preparing miniclasses for discussion groups, preparing to empower students in tutorials, responding to papers in writing, and learning to standardize grading through the use of rubrics and grade norming.

There were, however, problems with this format. The three day workshop took place just before Fall semester started. Many departments do not choose their TAs until the first week of the semester, so it was difficult to get names for the workshop. Also, since we provided texts and meals for the workshop, we asked departments to pay a per student fee. Some departments felt they did not want to or couldn't afford the fee to train the students.

This year we will continue to offer the extended workshops, one 3-day workshop in the fall, and also a Saturday workshop once each semester. But we are putting more emphasis on assisting with departmental trainings, on site. One department has already called to request that I take 2-3 hours of their departmental TA training in the fall to help the TAs with responding to and evaluating writing. Last winter the Physical Science 100 TA coordinator invited me to take an hour to help the TAs norm their evaluations of essay responses.

As we found we needed to offer more choices, I developed this response form offering various levels of support available (show the response form).

## **Content of Training**

We can train TAs through handbooks, websites, tutor training programs, inservice



training, or workshop presentations. But what should we teach in these venues? Ellen Strenski reports that based on several surveys she has conducted at UCLA, TAs are mainly concerned with how they can manage the paper load. The second most important concern was how to help student writers with organization, to think more clearly, and to take the assignment more seriously. The TAs were also very concerned with how to respond effectively to papers, and how to evaluate them (70-71).

Probably the best way to help TAs with the paper load is to teach them the value of teaching the writing process. Better papers are easier to evaluate, and students will write better papers if they are taught the skills and strategies they need to produce that paper from the beginning of the writing process. Many students don't even know how to interpret the professor's writing assignment. As Stoecker, Mullin, Schmidbauer, and Young explain, "The TA is a crucial intermediary in the classroom" (334). We can teach TAs how to interpret the assignment themselves, and how to guide the students in their interpretation.

Intervening periodically in the writing process can help the students organize their papers more effectively. Strenski teaches TAs to require students to submit 3x5 cards periodically: with thesis and supporting ideas; with citations from 5 potential sources; with possible objections to the thesis; etc. (71). In our workshop we suggest similar short assignments, as well as minilessons on thesis and structure, peer review and pairshares on developments, and conferences to discuss progress. All of these should help students learn to think more clearly, to take the assignment more seriously, and write better papers, which will be easier to grade.

The other concern, of how to comment on written papers and how to evaluate them, is the consuming fear of most TAs I have worked with. One of the most important skills we teach TAs



is to identify criteria for grading. We show them sample rubrics, and then give them time to work on the criteria that would fit the kinds of writing their students do. We encourage them to take their ideas to their professors, and work together in developing a grading sheet that will guide and standardize the evaluation.

With this grading sheet in hand, TAs will be more consistent in grading. They will be more likely to consider all the areas on the sheet, and not be swayed by, for example, a glib style. Also they will know what to evaluate. Some professors just say, if it is an excellent paper, give it an A; if it is very good a B, etc. The TAs, however, are not clear what exactly the professor means by "excellent." An analytical grading sheet can clear up the confusion. Also, the grading sheet allows the TA to give some response in every area, simply by checking a box.

We have found grade norming to be very important also. When several different TAs are grading the same assignment, there needs to be consistency in the way they are graded. We've all heard students complain "My paper was graded by the mean TA!" In our general workshops, we practice grade norming on short, general interest papers. In departmental workshops, we use the very papers or exam responses the TAs will need to grade eventually. We encourage the TAs to ask the professors to guide the grade norming process.

How to write marginal and end comments on papers is also an important skill for TAs to learn. Often untrained TAs will be so insecure of their ability to guide a student in writing, they will not comment at all, or write a very brief comment "good job. B" Students are deservedly frustrated by such responses, since they give no advice for improving next time. Alternatively, some TAs feel confident to evaluate grammar and little else, and so will mark surface errors profusely. We show the TAs samples of effective and ineffective comments, and talk about the



effect these comments have on students. We share experiences. (The TAs are students after all—they know.) We practice commenting on sample essays. We teach TAs that sometimes less is more—they don't need to be editors, they need to teach, and they'll need to choose which concepts are most important to teach at this point. This will save them time as well.

Practice in helping students in tutorials is also important. The writing-tutor-based training programs discussed above rely heavily on practice in tutoring situations. In a workshop, we can practice tutorials on each other, or we can do role plays. One of my favorite exercises is tag team tutoring. We all sit in a circle, with two chairs in the center. One TA models a student in a tutorial, featuring a particular problem behavior. The other TA models appropriate tutoring of that student. TAs in the circle can tag in at any time, either with an idea for helping the "student" or as a new "student" with a new problem.

Situating all this in theory is useful. In a semester-long training course selected readings could give a context for the practical strategies taught. In a relatively brief workshop, or even briefer guideline in a handbook, the reference to theory would have to be cursory. The TAs, however, are probably most interested in learning practical techniques and skills.

All TA training needs to focus on the needs of the TAs themselves. WAC Coordinators would do well to survey the TAs they work with to determine their concerns and needs before preparing materials. Also remember who the TAs are: strong students who do exceptionally well in their field. They are bright and capable, but may be uninformed about writing theory and pedagogy. All training must be seen as relevant to their situation, and respectful of their abilities.

#### Concerns

But TA training is not always easy. Over the course of this pilot year, we have found



many concerns.

One of the main concerns is simply getting the word out. When we first conceived this idea we thought departments would be beating down our doors. Faculty had told us they needed help in training TAs to work with writing. It seemed so obvious that this was a necessary service, and the university was darn lucky that we were bothering to offer it, out of the goodness of our hearts, as it were.

But word of the workshops did not spread like wildfire through the corridors and labs of the university. Instead we have sent letters to deans, who have nodded in interest, and set the information aside in an every growing pile of things to think about later, never to see the light of day again. We have attended every gathering of faculty we hear of to pass out fliers and response forms. We beg. We say, "don't take this back to your office, thinking you will ask your colleagues if they are interested. If you have the least bit of interest, fill out the form now, this minute and give it to us." We call faculty who value writing and ask them for leads. We have become promoters.

Perhaps money is the problem. We provide books (a tutoring guide and a writing handbook) and meals for the participants and ask the departments to pay for these in a per person sum, \$100 for the three day workshop, \$40 for the one-day workshop. Departments say, there's such turnover, is it worth it to pay money for the TAs to be trained? Their budgets are already strapped, this is one more thing that can easily be seen as optional.

Staffing is also an issue. Many times departments do not hire their TAs until the semester begins. Hence for the before-school workshop they cannot get the bodies on campus for the three days before school starts. Also it is hard to ask the students to give up three days or even a



Saturday to the workshop, when they are so very busy.

Another concern is training the TAs in isolation from the professors they work with. No matter how much a TA knows about writing instruction, if the professor he or she works with has other ideas, the TA must go along with that method. As one TA put it, "We have all of the responsibility, and none of the power."

There are also problems on the program level. This is all a lot of work. Who will do it? We have added the work to the WAC Coordinator's job description. However, if the WAC Coordinator is already working as much as her contract would suggest, it is hard to add more responsibilities. One possibility is to add more faculty, either release time or part-time to take over this responsibility. But then, where does the funding come?

#### Conclusion

However, in spite of inherent concerns, TA training is an important avenue for WAC to explore. TAs influence students. In many courses, the students come to the TAs for help, the TAs comment on the papers and assign the grades. If students are going to learn more about writing in that course, they will learn it from their TA.

TAs influence faculty. Stoecker et al tell how a trained TA convinced the professor to modify an assignment so it was more specific and applicable to the students (p. 338). Trained TAs can also help faculty to standardize their grading criteria, to sequence their assignments to provide for intervention at early stages in writing, and to explain disciplinary writing expectations more clearly. Well trained TAs can be a professor's own personal writing consultant.

And, many times, TAs become faculty. Many of the TAs we work with are in graduate



programs that will lead to faculty status, somewhere. We can train an entire new generation of WAC-aware faculty, who will start their teaching with experience and knowledge that will inform their whole career.

Some comments from our workshops demonstrate the need:

I have not had a writing class for a long time. I have learned more in this couple of days than in [my English class].

I especially appreciated the grading review. I went from feeling completely overwhelmed to a feeling that I can do this!

You've made me excited about helping students with writing, giving me confidence that I can be helpful and can incorporate writing into the course.

Thank you for providing this seminar. I wish I had had it when I began teaching. It should be a mandatory training session.

As WAC coordinators, we need to look for ways to support and train TAs at our institutions. Our support may be as simple as preparing a few pages of text to go in a handbook, or on a website. We may consult individually with TAs, or provide extensive training workshops. Virginia Draper says, "One of the things people on the margins [writing across the curriculum directors] learn to do is to go around the mountain if it is too high. For me, going around the mountain has meant training . . . teaching assistants" (3). Training TAs can be a somewhat covert way to improve writing instruction at our institutions.



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## WORKSHOPS ON WRITING FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS



The College of General Education and Honors announces the availability of two kinds of workshops for teaching assistants from all disciplines



Intensive WAC Workshops

These workshops cover a wide range of topics relating to teaching and grading writing. We offer two forms of these: 1) a three-day workshop just before school starts in the Fall, and 2) a Saturday all-day workshop sometime during the first third of both Fall and Winter semesters. These workshops are open to TAs from all disciplines. We provide a packet of materials, two textbooks, and meals for the students. To defray these expenses, participating departments are asked to provide some funding for each TA.



**Departmental Workshops** 

Departments can request training specifically geared to their TAs. These workshops could be a one-hour training on how to grade essay exams or a more inclusive daylong seminar. We are willing to tailor our presentations to best meet your particular needs.

## Topics to be Taught

- Helping students get started on writing
- Helping students revise, through written comments, through tutorials, and through group help sessions
- Helping students through fair evaluation

## For More Information

Contact
Beth Hedengren
Consultant to Writing Across the Curriculum
378-7844



## TA Workshops on Teaching and Evaluating Writing Departmental Interest Response Form

Department				
Contact person	Phc	one		
Email				
Please indicate your interest in any o	or all of the follo	owing possibilities		
Three-Day Intensive Work meals and materials) Probably August 29-31, 200			es (\$100 fee per participa	ant, co
Probable number of TA part	ticipants from y	our department	· 	
Degree of commitme	ent: High	Medium	Low	
One-Day Intensive Worksh Probably September 15, 200			(\$40 fee per participant)	)
Fall semester: Probable num	ber of TA partic	cipants from your	department	
Degree of commitme	ent: High	Medium	Low	
Winter semester: Probable no	umber of TA pa	rticipants from yo	our department	_
Degree of commitme	ent: High	Medium	Low	
Departmental Training (1-2	? hours, on a lir	nited focus)		
Possible date		time		
Possible topic(s)				
Number of TAs participating	;			
Comments:				
Departmental Training (Extended Comments (please describe w		n):		

Please return to: Beth Hedengren, 122 HGB, BYU, Provo, UT 84604



# TA/Adjunct Workshop on Teaching Writing in the Disciplines

August 29-31, 2001

9:00 a.m.-3:30 p.m. 250 MSRB

A General Overview

Time	Wednesday Helping Students Get Started	Thursday Helping Students Revise	Friday Helping Students through Fair Evaluation
8:30	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast
9:00	Roles and Goals: how TAs can facilitate better writing	Resources: Reading/Writing Center, Writing Fellows, websites, library Help Sessions	Evaluation: developing consistent grading criteria, grade norming, ways to avoid burnout
10:00	Helping Students Get Started on Writing: The Writing Process	Responding To Written Drafts: respecting students' ownership, teaching with specific praise, asking challenging questions	Evaluation: continued
11:00	Understanding and Clarifying Assignments: formal and informal writing; essay exams, long papers, short answer quizzes, etc.	Style: concise writing, coherence, word choice	Grade Norming: continued
12:00	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
1:00	Invention: pre-writing, topic selection, topic narrowing, finding support Arrangement: developing a thesis, structuring an argument, argumentation strategies	Conferences: encouraging student responsibility, asking leading questions, helping students start revision during the conference, troubleshooting	Presentations
2:00	Drafting: making sense of research material, overcoming writer's block, developing arguments, paragraphing	Editing: mechanics, usage	Presentations
:00	Application or The Long Research Paper: avoiding plagiarism, incorporating source material, documentation styles	Editing Practice	Presentations
:30	Consultations	Consultations	Consultations



# Workshop on Writing for Teaching Assistants and Adjuncts

February 10, 2001

Time	Topie
8:30	Breakfast
8:45	Welcome/Introductions
9:00	The TA's Role in Helping Students Get Started on the Writing Process
9:30	Invention Arrangement Drafting
10:00	Conferencing
10:30	Help Sessions
11:00	Break
11:15	Helping Students Through Response
12:00	Lunch
12:30	Style
1:00	Editing
1:30	Break
1:45	Helping Students through Fair Evaluation
2:45	Sum up





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